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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7512  
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RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1138  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4685  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8226  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5788  
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1561  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1545  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000333

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO  
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA: THE POLITICS OF CYCLONE NARGIS ASSISTANCE

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Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (C) Summary: The UN estimates over 1.5 million Burmese are in urgent need of food, water, and shelter in Irrawaddy and Rangoon Division. Today, the Minister of Social Welfare agreed to allow the UN to send local staff liaisons to GOB operations centers in the Delta, and seemed receptive to establishing a joint logistics center with the UN. He was waiting for a decision from Than Shwe on visas, but indicated his support. UNSYG Ban Ki Moon has contacted the Senior General to urge him to issue the visas, but has not received a response. Sources tell us a group of influential businessmen are meeting with third-ranking general Thura Shwe Mann to convince him to give the Foreign Ministry permission to issue the visas now, even if Than Shwe has not agreed yet. Providing quick and effective assistance to the Burmese should be the USG's first priority in the wake of this unprecedented disaster, and could prove transformative in changing how people and officials think and act. End summary.

12. (C) The UN is working around-the-clock to organize the humanitarian assistance response to the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis. Their preliminary assessments indicate that 1 million people will need food, water, and shelter in Irrawaddy Division, and at least 500,000 in Rangoon Division. The government is reluctant to allow non-government assessment teams into Kayin and Mon States and Bago Division, but based on the information the UN has obtained from residents there, the situation in those areas appears relatively better. For the time being, the UN is not considering these areas an emergency priority. The UN continues to receive reports from staff in the Delta of an increasingly dire and desperate situation. UN local staff in Labutta reported a make-shift camp of 100,000 people has been set up with nothing to eat or drink. Corpses are floating everywhere, contaminating local waterways that people use for drinking water because they have nothing else.

13. (C) Prime Minister Thein Sein established a Disaster Management Committee consisting of eight ministers. The Minister of Social Welfare is coordinating assistance operations from Rangoon, with the help of the Deputy Minister of Health. Today, UN Resident Coordinator Dan Baker and WFP Director Chris Kaye met with the Minister of Social Welfare

and the Minister of Immigration and Population to request permission to establish a joint logistics center with the GOB to coordinate incoming assistance, and to urge that visas for the UNDAC team be issued as soon as possible.

14. (C) The Minister of Social Welfare was receptive to establishing a joint logistics center and also agreed to allow the UN to send local-staff liaison officers to Patheingyi, where the GOB has established its main operations center in the Delta, and Labutta and Bogelay, where it has established two sub-stations. Regarding visas for the UN's international experts, the Minister indicated he and most of the government ministers welcomed international experts to assist in the relief efforts, but that only the Senior General could make this decision. Everyone was waiting for guidance from Nay Pyi Taw.

15. (C) Baker told us that in order to prompt the Senior General to make this decision, Ban Ki Moon contacted Than Shwe and urged him to accept international assistance for the relief effort, and to grant visas to the international experts needed to properly coordinate the assistance. Than Shwe has not responded.

16. (C) Sources told us that a group of influential businessmen have met with the regime's third-ranking general, Thura Shwe Mann, pleading with him to allow international experts into the country because Burma has neither the equipment, expertise, nor capacity to administer disaster assistance on its own. According to our sources, Than Shwe had not agreed because the UN's proposal was presented to him in a manner that emphasized its information gathering, rather than its disaster relief capabilities. The businessmen fully understand the scope of the disaster and the implications of

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an inadequate government response. According to our source, they have made headway with Thura Shwe Mann, who indicated he was inclined to give the go-ahead for the visas, even without Than Shwe's approval. UK Embassy officers have heard similar accounts from their sources as well.

17. (C) Despite no final decision from Than Shwe, the UN plans to proceed with its assistance efforts, hoping that the cooperative-minded ministers' inability to cope with the situation will result in the tail wagging the dog. They hope GOB officials may begin to make decisions themselves, without waiting for approval from Nay Pyi Taw, in order to cope with the epic humanitarian needs.

18. (C) This process may already be happening. Yesterday, UNICEF officials met with the Minister of Health who said he had no conditions on international INGOs working on the disaster efforts. He instructed UNICEF to provide assistance any way it could. A UNDP program officer also attended a meeting yesterday with Minister of Agriculture Htay Oo, who was fully aware of the dire food situation in the Delta and said he welcomed any assistance the UN could provide.

19. (C) Comment: The scope of this disaster is unprecedented in Burma. Providing quick and effective humanitarian assistance to the one-million plus affected by the cyclone should be our first priority. If we make the referendum the issue, so will the regime, and much-needed U.S. assistance and expertise will never make it to those in desperate need. Many Burmese, including senior officials, realize they cannot organize any recovery effort on their own. This disaster may bring opportunities. It may cause people and officials to start making decisions on their own without waiting for high-level approvals. This would truly be transformative, empowering government technocrats and civil society to act. Often it takes calamities of this magnitude to force changes in how people think and act. The United States needs to be in the front to push this transformation. End comment.

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